

The I-Search: Writing to Learn

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For a college study strategies course, we utilized Macrorie's (1988) I-Search process to facilitate students' individual exploration of the typical "study skills" issues that such a course would cover. The I-Search promotes active reflection, evaluation, and synthesis, and is an excellent tool both for aiding students in learning new information and for learning about the essence of scholarship. The result was a multi-layered learning opportunity to use the processes of scholarly research to bring new information to bear on a question or problem the students had in their own lives as learners.

Our Learning Center found itself in a difficult, yet exciting position a few years ago. We were given the opportunity to take over and redesign a study skills course that another department had originally developed and had been offering for time immemorial. The new course had to be designed in a way that would ensure rigor and quality control and reflect current learning theory. This is the story of our own developmental process that has led to a unique approach to study skills. This approach has changed everything about our relationship with students in the course and the relationship between students and the course content.

The course was built on a foundation of good intentions. It had four key aims, and admirable aims they were. We wanted students to explore how they knew themselves, how they communicated with others, how they used the resources available to them, and how they could be active learners. To that end, we tried to help students understand common theories of learning, such as Multiple Intelligences, Bloom's Taxonomy, and the ideas of internal and external locus of control. We created activities that walked students through critical reading strategies and we had them apply note-taking techniques. However, it was, despite our best intentions, really just a lecture class in which we dispensed advice about the "right" way of living a scholarly life.

At the end of the course, we spent several weeks working on writing skills. We talked about writing to learn and used Macrorie's (1988) I-Search process. Since it was an election year, we had the students use the

I-Search process to consider and come to understand a political issue. Their papers provided a glimmer of light in an otherwise fairly dull semester.

Since research is the basis of what we do in the academy, it is essential for students to understand that research is about neither regurgitation nor creative cut and paste. Constructing a research paper is supposed to involve critical reading and thinking skills. A research paper is supposed to be an entry into the larger conversation on the topic at hand. A research paper is an opportunity for students to write to learn. The I-Search process properly emphasizes the writing to learn aspect of the scholarly activity of research writing.

The I-Search process is based on the notion that individuals need to do research from a personal perspective for it to be a meaningful enterprise. Macrorie (1988) urges students to choose questions that they truly want to know the answer to and, as they search for information, to continually take stock of how the information they find relates to the question they have posed. This is the stuff of true scholarship. This is writing to learn.

It is no surprise that I found the I-Search process to be the point when the semester made the most sense to me and to the students.

Functioning essentially as a research journal, the I-Search reinforced all the theories we had set out to teach with the course. I-Searching begins by asking students to connect their personal experience to information to be learned. First, students examine, in writing, what they already know about the topic, an exercise which leads them to ask “what else do I want to know about this?” This “activating prior knowledge” is recognized as a means of effecting meaningful learning (Mayer, 2001). Students then write a question or a list of questions that are genuine areas of curiosity for them so that they feel compelled to engage in a meaningful search to answer the question. The third part of the paper is the research itself. To find appropriate sources on the search, the writer judges all sources on the basis of criteria such as credibility, accuracy, reasonableness, documentation, and currency. These are vital information literacy skills that all students need in college (Harris, 1997). After finding appropriate sources, the writer reads the articles or websites thoroughly and critically, creating a summary of the author’s key ideas and then commenting on how the source helps one see “the big picture.” This critical reflection directly connects their reading to their writing. The final entry in the I-Search is a summary of what the writer has learned from going through the process. When they’ve completed this process, the students haven’t

written a research paper, but they have created a record of the thinking that undergirds good research.

Rather than continuing with the less personal political topics that the students had examined in the first semester, we had the students in the second semester use the I-Search process to learn about their majors. They examined a wide range of things, such as what jobs their majors really prepared them for, what internships were available, what specialties existed within their major, and what graduate schools would require. Although the I-Search was an effective process for the students who took our course the first semester, it was even more significant the second semester when the students used it to examine their majors.

After teaching the study skills course for a year as it had been designed, I was given the freedom to change it as I saw fit. I decided that the I-Search was the perfect vehicle for shifting the focus of the course to where it needed to be: onto the students' own learning lives. Because it modeled what I really needed students to understand, I saw that centering on the I-Search could make the course truly student-centered.

I decided to use the I-Search process repeatedly throughout the semester to examine a range of issues related to learning. A turning point occurred when I began using the I-Search as a process for facilitating students' engagement with the study skills and learning theory information about which we'd previously lectured to them. The I-Search was instrumental in helping students see how the course information applied to their learning lives. In my syllabus, I retained the last I-Search paper about their majors, and I added two more I-Searches. The first two I-Search papers used sources such as learning center websites and study skills texts to allow students to choose a learning-related issue that they want to explore (see Appendix). The topic "Who am I as a learner?" led students to ask questions about themselves, their habits, their strengths and weaknesses—questions that they approached using a wide range of informational resources.

Students astounded me, and themselves, with the depth of the questions they had about themselves as learners. A fair number gravitated toward learning about typical topics such as time management and study strategies. Others dealt with the psychological aspects of their own procrastination. Several young men explored the social reasons they avoided learning and "looking smart." Some students researched learning disabilities with which they had been diagnosed, and a few researched strategies for managing Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

On a practical note, the reason there were two I-Searches about “self as learner” was that some students had big questions to wrestle with, and some had smaller ones. I allowed them to do two short I-Searches with four sources each or one long I-Search that drew on eight sources. Again, this built-in flexibility emphasized to students that the assignment was about them and for them.

With the I-Search as its centerpiece, the study skills course provided an experience in which students used the tools of scholarship to answer questions about their own lives. Surely, being educated is about being able to apply knowledge in new situations one faces; it is about acting on what one knows. The learning that takes place through the I-Search is multi-layered. Among other things, by doing the I-Search, students learn about the process and the nature of research, they learn study skills, and they learn what it is to actively engage with reading.

The key to the effectiveness of the I-Search lies in its step-by-step application of imperative cognitive and metacognitive skills. Paris and Winograd (1999) described the ideal of “Self-regulated learning” as having three major components: (a) Awareness of thinking, (b) Use of strategies, (c) Sustained motivation. Through its carefully designed steps, the I-Search aids students in building on some semblance of each of these characteristics. First, a main goal of the I-Search is for students to become aware of their thinking about the resources they find. The I-Search itself is a collection of strategies—activation of prior knowledge, reading with a purpose, reading critically, reflecting—that students learn to apply to each new piece of information they encounter, and this application has noticeable effects on their comprehension of the material. The use of the strategies that are built into the I-Search provide the necessary proof to the students that the strategies are effective. The value of active reflection is demonstrated to the students by the work they do for themselves. Using the process to help students think about learning strategies compounds its metacognitive benefits: the articles, books and websites they read for their papers have an immediate impact on their lives as they read about a strategy, try it out, and reflectively evaluate its effectiveness.

In addition, the I-Search process creates an authentic environment in which the activities of effective scholarship are integrated with a learning task. Through the student-centered and student-empowering process of the I-Search, we were able to model how the mindfulness of acting and then reflecting on those actions makes the learning experience more meaningful and useful.

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APPENDIX

I-Search Paper Assignment #1

For this essay, you will examine yourself as a learner, and you will discover resources to help you to expand your cache of strategies for learning and understanding. Your sources will be varied: some will be assigned; you will choose others on your own from among credible sources.

Part One: Consider your history as a student and as a learner (these may not be the same things to you). Write at least two pages in which you consider and carefully reflect upon how you see yourself as a learner.

Some questions to help you get started:

- »What's the best learning experience you've had? What made it the best?
- »What's the worst learning experience you've had? What made it the worst?
- »What's studying like for you?
- »What's your biggest strength in school? Why?
- »What's your biggest fear about school? Why?

Part Two: For the second part of this paper, you will create a list of questions you have about learning now that you have thought about your role as a learner. You might want to focus on searching for strategies that will help you with a particular issue, such as time management, organization, attention, memory, stress reduction, test preparation, test anxiety, or motivation. Your search may be more general, too. You might want to find out about a number of varied student success strategies. How you approach this is up to you.

Part Three: You will keep a running log as you search for, find, and evaluate sources. Most importantly, you should focus on how your understanding

of your topic evolved. You must consult at least four sources. To begin, your first and second sources are the Multiple Intelligence survey (yellow packet) and the Jung personality survey (pink packet) you took in class. You will choose at least two additional sources to work with.

As you search for information you should be trying to find ideas that you can apply to your own life. You will have to find more information than you will actually use for this part of the paper.

For each source you find, you must:

1. Summarize its content.
2. If it is a strategy, try it out. Most strategies require a few days' worth of use if you are honestly trying to determine their worth.
3. Reflect on the results of your "experiment," or on how you perceive the new idea.
4. Consider how this changes your understanding of "the big picture."

Part Four: After having tried a number of strategies and having considered some new ideas, you will evaluate where you stand. Who are you as a learner now? What are the new questions you have about this issue?

Part Five: Works Cited page in MLA format.

Note: You may choose to do either one I-Search about your learning with eight sources or two I-Searches with four sources each. If you choose to do two, you will explore two topics.

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